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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS 1206
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2065
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000623

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN CRACKS DOWN ON RELIGION, CANCELS JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES MEETINGS

REF: A) DUSHANBE 518 B) 06 DUSHANBE 2210

CLASSIFIED BY: TJACOBSON, AMBASSADOR, STATE, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A deputy mayor of Dushanbe city along with officers from the State Committee on National Security shut down a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting of members and supporters on April 12. On April 3 and 4, the State Committee on National Security summoned one of the group's leaders for questioning. The latest government interference is part of a disturbing trend towards religious groups, particularly Christian groups who proselytize. Valeri Dudaev, a Jehovah's Witness, met with PolOff on April 21 to discuss the group's ongoing problems. END SUMMARY.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES NOT ALLOWED TO MEET

¶2. (C) On the evening of April 2 the Jehovah's Witnesses had planned a large gathering of members and supporters to celebrate a religious holiday. The group had reserved a meeting space in a local theater. The manager of the theater building where the Jehovah's Witnesses were supposed to meet told Dudaev that Dushanbe mayor Ubaidulloyev gave him a verbal order not to permit Christian gatherings. On April 2 when the deputy mayor and State Committee on National Security officials approached Dudaev, they told him that the Jehovah's Witnesses have no right to gather without government permission. According to Tajik law, registered religious groups do have the right of association.

¶3. (C) On April 3 and 4, the State Committee on National Security summoned Dudaev for questioning. Officials threatened to take him to court for violating laws and not obtaining permission from the city to hold a meeting. Officials were not able to show Dudaev copies of the laws he allegedly violated. They also threatened to deport him back to Russia, where Dudaev is a citizen, and to create problems for the new building the group is constructing. The State Committee on National Security also instructed him to report names of anybody who approaches the group and wants to join the Jehovah's Witnesses.

USING REGISTRATION AS A WEAPON

¶4. (SBU) The Jehovah's Witnesses are registered at the national level with the Department of Religious Affairs at the

Ministry of Culture and have the right to operate in Tajikistan.

However, for the past five years, the group has been unable to register a branch office in Turson-Zade. The local government says it is the national government's responsibility to register the branch and the national government says it is the local government's responsibility. This catch-22 is the government's ploy to keep the group from acquiring official status.

15. (C) In the meantime, while the group battles on and tries to register, for the past two years its members have been regularly called in by the local government offices at least once a month for questioning and harassment. The questioning occurs most frequently in Turson-Zade where the group is not considered a legal organization. Dudaev confirmed that although members have been harassed, none have been beaten or tortured. He is, however, disturbed by the disrespect and inappropriate language the officials use. In a written statement detailing a recent incident, one security officer is quoted as threatening two Jehovah's Witnesses telling them that if they talked to local people about the Bible, he would "order his seven subordinates to strip and rape them, and then he would come and personally cut them in half." Testimonies from other Christian denominations also confirm that security officers are particularly belligerent towards local Tajiks who have converted to Christianity and "betrayed" their Islamic faith.

16. (SBU) One of the excuses the local government frequently uses to call in the Jehovah's Witnesses is because they distribute religious literature and journals. The law does not prohibit proselytizing and distribution of religious materials by religious groups. Jehovah's Witnesses asked the government to provide in writing the law the group is allegedly violating, but the government has never done so.

17. (C) The Jehovah's Witness problem is one among a series of
DUSHANBE 00000623 002 OF 002

other significant issues Christian groups have faced, including the recent legal problems and harassment of Operation Mercy (reftel A) and the ongoing case of the mayor's attempt to seize the Grace Sun Min Church's property (reftel B). Interlocutors at all three organizations say that they have not heard any complaints from local Tajik citizens and find Tajiks to respect Christian organizations. Government officials however explain that local Tajiks frequently complain about Christian missionaries.

18. (C) COMMENT: In recent months, the government has closed several mosques and continues to keep a close eye on certain Islamic clergy because it fears extremism. However, the State Committee on National Security's attitude towards Christian groups and recent harassment indicates a trend of suspicion and anti-Christian sentiment within the government, particularly towards Christian groups that proselytize, distribute religious literature or have a high number of converts. Groups such as the Russian Orthodox Church or the Vatican's Representative here in Dushanbe do not report conflict with the government. All three incidents also relate to conflict with the city government or directly with the Dushanbe mayor himself, but it remains unclear whether the directive for Christian harassment stems from the mayor or a higher authority. Tajikistan purports to be a state that guarantees religious freedom; however, the government's actions contradict its constitutional laws. END COMMENT.
JACOBSON